To H. H. Kimmel with the kind regards of Philip Auchampaugh

A Forgotten Journey of An Antebellum President

THE TRIP AND ADDRESSES OF JAMES BUCHANAN DELIVERED DURING HIS JOURNEY TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL IN 1859.

BY PHILIP AUCHAMPAUGH, Ph. D.,
State Teachers College, Duluth, Minnesota.

Author of "Robert Tyler, Southern Rights Champion"; "James Buchanan and His Cabinet on the Eve of Secession."

In the early summer of 1859 Buchanan and Jacob Thompson went to the Commencement of the University of North Carolina. Buchanan's speeches, on that occasion, have escaped his biographers, and are, therefore, given here in detail. They plainly exhibit his earnest solicitude for the Union and acute appreciation of the dangers which seemed to threaten it.

North Carolina was among the most conservative of Southern States. It will be remembered that she did not secede because of a liking for Secession, but because of her aversion to coercion of South Carolina by Lincoln in 1861. In such a State Buchanan was bound to be welcome. At nearly every town en route he was officially received. The *Herald's* correspondent, who had to sleep on the floor at Chapel Hill, and had difficulty in keeping up with the procession, remarked:[1]

"His passage through the old North State is marked by all the characteristics of a grand ovation and a display of heartfelt enthusiasm such as rarely attends the visit of any statesman hero to the south. I have never witnessed so warm a reception as that which greets the President on his present tour."

"At one place where the train stopped, we find the President mixed freely with the crowd at every point, receiving their greetings with a cordiality which seemed to arouse their enthusiasm to a degree seldom seen manifested."[2]

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[1] *New York Herald*, June 6, 1859.
[2] *Ibid.*, June 4, 1859.

Address:
1519 E. 4th St
Duluth, Minn.

There were four locomotives to the train out of Raleigh, but part of the journey to Chapel Hill had to be made by stage. The heat was oppressive and the travelers white with dust. While Buchanan looked somewhat fatigued, the correspondent declared that he bore up well and exhibited great endurance for a man of his years. "In the chapel" enthusiasm seemed to have no limit. It was evident that it made a deep impression on the President[1] Here were tributes such as a cautious, non-demagogic man like Buchanan had seldom witnessed. Crowds were everywhere; bouquets by Southern belles; addresses of welcome by the "best citizens"; banquets; dances, kindness, boundless hospitality. Within 18 months Buchanan was expected, by some, to initiate war against these people. What does fate expect of humanity?

The speeches, many of them impromptu, throw interesting light upon Buchanan's attitude toward the approaching crisis. Through them lives the spirt of Clay. The appeal to the spirit of unity of Revolutionary days is much like the effort made by Edward Everett in his lecture upon Washington. This was good psychology. These remarks are the more interesting because Buchanan made few informal speeches after becoming President. All through them is manifest the attempt to revive the spirit of the Era of Good Feeling and the earlier patriotism of the War for Independence. The virtues mentioned show the ideals of the President. His appreciation of the impending possibilities is again in evidence, as in his Fort Duquesne letters of a few months previous.

The extracts below contain those portions of his addresses dealing with the situation of the country in reply to the Governor's address of welcome. (Some allowance for accuracy must be made as they were taken down on the spot.)

At Weldon he said he had long wished to come, and added:

"I must have come now or not at all, for the age I will have attained when my term shall have ended and when I shall go into retirement is that at which man is warned to remain at rest and prepare for that great event which must overtake us all."

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[1] *Ibid*, June 7, 1859.

He proceeded to compliment their love of liberty and of law and order, saying:

"Liberty as cherished by all parties in North Carolina became a great civil blessing unmixed as it is with lawlessness which would make it a curse. The Governor has spoken of me as a supporter of the Constitution and the Union, and he has spoken truly; I ever expect to be. As long as this great charter of liberty remains unimpaired we shall be the greatest and happiest people in the world. But let it be shattered and we become the scorn of the world and the hope of tyrants. Thank God there is no danger to it from North Carolina, for while she may have had her differences in politics she has never wavered in the great questions of the Constitution. (Loud and prolonged cheers.) God bless the Old North State!"

Jacob Thompson was then called upon to speak, and in his reply remarked regarding the radicals who were trying to shake the Union:

"I wish to run up the stars and stripes and declare that for one I am ready to battle against these agitators."

At Raleigh,[1] after alluding to the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence and the opposition of the North Carolinians to Cornwallis, Buchanan again turned to the question of preserving the Union:

"You have rallied around the government that your fathers have made—you have been true to the Constitution, and the Union will remain as long as the principles which have actuated you for half a century continue to animate you—as long as the young men preserve the civic virtues of Marion and other distinguished statesmen of your state . . . It has become fashionable of late years to discuss the value of the Union. Its price cannot be estimated. It has become fashionable when any little discontent arrives in the country to threaten to break up this glorious Union. These threats were not spoken of when I was a young man—they were not spoken of twenty years ago—not that I was a young man at that time." (A gentleman near the President—"I knew you twenty years ago and you certainly were not very young at that time!")

[1]The *Richmond Dispatch* and the *New York Herald* seem to have been the only papers having correspondents present, except local papers. Some of the speeches are from the *National Intelligencer*, June 2, 1859, but the greater number are from the *Herald*.

"I know I was not. But let us reflect. It is not every transitory or real evil in the administration of the government which ought to induce us to think of disunion. The tide of public opinion fluctuates and if we have evil today, as long as the Union is preserved, we may expect good tomorrow, through the American people. If they go wrong, they will, after some reflection, take the backward track and soon get right.[1] Let this Union cease to exist; let the sovereign sister States be separated; let intestine wars arise and liberty upon earth is gone forever. This would be the joy and delight of many, while every friend of civil and religious liberty will consider it the worst catastrophe that ever mankind endured. (Applause.) My friend here referred to what was going on in the Old World. Four million of men are collected together by the sovereigns of the Old World and the despots are ready to enter into mortal conflict and destroy each other. And for what? For the interests of dynasties, the pride of sovereigns, and the glory of commanders.[2] But the poor people from whose hard earnings the money is extorted to pay the expenses of this war will be the sufferers. The spectacle of which my friend here has spoken ought certainly to attach the people of the United States to their country. You are a sovereign people and here I am appointed by them not to rule over them, but to administer the government according to their wish, and to be responsible to them for the manner in which I do so. The worst of it is that I am held responsible for many things I do not do. (Laughter.) But although my career is almost to close, and my public sun is about to set, yet I shall forever cherish a grateful recollection of my visit to North Carolina. As long as I live I shall remember this day as one of the proudest of my life." (Loud applause.)

On the way from Raleigh to Chapel Hill the President made the following impromptu address at Franklinton in response to an address of welcome by G. E. Blackwell:

Fellow citizens of North Carolina, I am happy to meet you. From the time that I entered your glorious Old State until the present time, I have been received with the utmost cordiality and

[1]Here is an instance of his political philosophy. The consolation that kept him on his unpopular course at the last of his administration and which consoled him during the War of Invasion—1861-65—when vilification was rife is here revealed.

[2]Allusion to the Austro-Sardinian War of 1859. Buchanan forcefully presented the outlines and shallow glories of War as a note of warning. It gives evidence of the conviction of the danger of a Civil War in case of attempted separation.

kindness. You are a people well known to the world for your steadiness of character, for the conservative feeling, and for your true patriotism. You are well known to your sister State, and emphatically well known to that State from which I proceed. (Applause.) As long as the people of North Carolina entertain the principles and the feeling for which they have been remarkable, as long as they entertain the love of country which has always distinguished them, as long as they entertain that conservative spirit which binds together the different States of the Union, so long will they be glorious and useful to their fellow citizens of other States. (Applause.) The time may come to try their patriotism and I trust that they will find themselves equal to the crisis. People attempt to value the Constitution and Union. They are invaluable. (Applause.) Money cannot represent their value. You cannot estimate the blessing which the Constitution and Union confer upon the people of the United States and all mankind. Let us then cherish it and promote it. Let us swear by the memory of our fathers that we will resist every attempt to tear from the constellation the States of which the Union is composed, any fragment of light; and let the man be execrated for all time who will attempt to break up this glorious Union. (Loud applause.) I thank you, fellow citizens, for this reception. I am somewhat fatigued and feel unable to address you at any length. It is true, as the gentlemen said, I do not come among you as a mighty conqueror to devastate and destroy, but I come among you as a plain, humble individual like yourselves, with all the feelings and sympathy of mankind entertaining a sincere pride at the cordial reception which meets me everywhere. (Applause.)

The following speech was made at Chapel Hill. The President received the degree of LL. D. from the University. He had already been presented with a Doctorate of Civil Laws from Oxford when he was Ambassador to England.

"I thank you for the kindness and am thankful for the kindness with which I have been received by the citizens. I have always had a partiality for the Old North State. Her eminently prudent, wise and conservative sons have always stood by the Constitution, and the laws, and are destined in the history of this country to do much to preserve this glorious Union.

"I thank you most heartily for the kind reference which you have made to my native State. I am proud to hear of her association with North Carolina. The two Sisters have generally met together in all important questions, and in all history North Carolina has followed the footsteps of Governor Hartsdale, in whose

day, as in Penn's day, the Indians all loved the white men because they were kindly treated by him.

"You refer to mournful events. You speak of President Polk. He was proud in speaking of his intense love of his Alma Mater. He was a good man, a great man, an honest man. No man ever performed his high office more conscientiously than James K. Polk. Justice has not yet been done to his memory. But the impartial historian when he comes to collect the events of that period, in the list of the most notable and distinguished men of the country. He was a laborious man and sacrificed himself with intense labors. I might refer to other distinguished men who have graduated at this college which would probably be invidious. Of the dead, one may speak; it is best to say nothing of the living.

"I have come to this institution of learning because with me, mind is everything. It has produced the best fruits of the country. It is a practical institution and I may venture to say has proved the superiority of a collegiate over a private education. It creates emulation. The boy who is compelled to recite with his master, not intermingled with others, has not a due spirit of emulation aroused; while each boy at college endeavors to acquire superiority over, and he becomes thoroughly prepared. This preparation has been seen in the hosts of men whom you have sent to other States. As far as I know they carry with them the firm integrity and wisdom which characterizes the people of this State in an eminent degree. They have been scattered over the world and have contributed essentially to give character to the place of their choice.

"I wish I could address all young men in my hearing. A vast responsibility rests upon them. As generations rise and sink and are forgotten, principles remain and are eternal. I would advise them to devote themselves to the preservation of the principles of the Constitution, for without those blessings, our liberties are gone. Let this Constitution be torn to atoms; let thirty republics rise up against each other; let the Union separate, and it would be the most fatal day for the liberties of the human race that ever dawned upon any land. Let this experiment be tried, and mankind and every friend of liberty would deplore the sad event. I belong to a passing generation. My lamp of life cannot continue long. I hope I may survive to the end of my Presidential term, but so emphatically do I believe that mankind as well as the people of the United States are interested in the preservation of the Union that I hope I may be gathered to my fathers before I should witness its dissolution.

"In the flux and reflux of public opinion things are constantly

passing away. Events that may be considered great today, the reflux of public opinion may remove tomorrow. Let us keep together, for better or for worse, as man and wife. Let it be the same. For though troubles, as they say, sometimes prevail in the married state, yet the couple hold together and pursue their quiet way.

"I thank you for the kind and cordial reception. I have no doubt it will prove one of the most interesting periods of my life."

The events of this trip[1] confirmed beyond a doubt the fact that Buchanan was held in high regard by the conservative element of the South.

The tone throughout President Buchanan's speeches is similar to that of other border statesmen of mature years in his day. Such a list would include Senator Crittenden of Kentucky who drafted the Crittenden Compromise of 1860-61; Ex-President John Tyler who presided over the Peace Convention which met, at the request of Virginia, in Washington in 1861; Senator R. M. T. Hunter of Virginia, and James A. Bayard of Delaware. These men spoke in the tones of conciliation and compromise which had preserved the Union in various crises of 1798 to 1861. In these days of ever growing consolidation it is becoming more and more difficult to appreciate the spirit of other days. But these new tendencies and changes should not blind us to the fact that the balanced system of government may too have had its uses in the maintenance and development of constitutional liberty in America.

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[1]On his return trip the President paid the following tribute to his old friend and intimate, William Rufus King, who died during his term in the vice presidency in 1853. He was an alumnus of the University of North Carolina. Buchanan said he was "a man with whom I was more intimate than I ever was with any other man: a man of as pure patriotism and as high a sense of honor as any that ever existed."

Reprinted from
Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine
July, 1935